

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 951

CG 012 899

AUTHOR Wagner, Victor; And Others
TITLE Ecological and Paradoxical Interventions with Couples.
PUB DATE 17 Mar 78
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southeastern Psychological Association (24th, Atlanta, Georgia, March 15-18, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Enrichment Experience; Helping Relationship; *Interpersonal Competence; Intervention; *Marriage; *Marriage Counseling; Methods; Research Projects; Social Relations

ABSTRACT

Reported is a preliminary paper on research currently in progress to investigate the effectiveness of written paradoxical and linear messages given to couples within the context of marital enrichment. There are several reasons for incorporating written communication into clinical practice, e.g., they are more difficult to ignore, forget or distort than are verbal messages. Linear letters were written in a straightforward, easy to understand style, offering the couple direct feedback as to how the enricher viewed their relationship. Paradoxical letters were constructed within a paradoxical frame of reference, offering the couple a somewhat cryptic view of their relationship, where assets can be seen as liabilities, weakness as strength, etc. The couples were divided into four groups on a random basis: control, enrichment only, enrichment plus paradoxical letters, and enrichment plus linear letters. All groups were evaluated during an initial session and seven weeks later, following completion of the six-session enrichment lesson. The written communications were given to the couples following the fourth enrichment session. Trends indicate that those couples receiving enrichment plus paradoxical letters showed the greatest improvement as measured by a series of self-report marital satisfaction questionnaires. (Author)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED160951

Ecological and Paradoxical Interventions with Couples

Victor Wagner, Gerald Weeks, and Luciano L'Abate

Family Study Center

Department of Psychology

Georgia State University

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G Weeks

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Paper Presented at S. E. P. A.

March 17, 1978

GG012899

Ecological and Paradoxical Interventions with Couples

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of written statements or letters given to couples participating in marital enrichment would be an effective therapeutic technique and a useful adjunct to marital enrichment. The hypotheses investigated were that in comparison to a non-treatment control group, groups receiving intervention in the form of enrichment, enrichment plus a direct, straightforward or linear letter, or enrichment plus a paradoxical letter would show greater degrees of positive change. However, the primary focus of the present study was to assess the effectiveness of paradoxical letters (Selvini-Palazzoli, 1975). Very little empirical research has been conducted on the use of paradoxical messages or letters. In more general terms, the study was designed to assess the effectiveness of paradoxical psychotherapy, since very little empirical work has been conducted on this type of therapy (Weeks & L'Abate, 1978; Soper & L'Abate, 1977).

The present study evolved as an ecological intervention for several reasons. These reasons are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) view of human ecological development. In short he stated that ecology "requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject." (p. 514) First, enrichment programs are very broad-based. They focus on a variety of dimensions of the marital relationship. Thus, the enricher learns a great deal about the couple both historically and structurally. The structural information is gained by asking questions involving a variety of problems and situations. Since enrichment usually takes place in the couple's home, it also provides information

about the couple's physical and social contexts. Moreover, this study used only non-clinical or normal subjects. This fact enlarges our knowledge of how normal couples function and how to enhance the functioning of normal couples. The letters given to the couples are also ecologically oriented. They are written only after considerable information has been acquired about each couple's unique system of behavior. The letters are directed toward the marital relationship and not at each individual. The letters conceptualize the behavior of the couples as interlocking or transactional.

The use of written communication in therapy is not new (Pearson, 1965). Albert Ellis (1965) serendipitously found that while he wrote down his interpretations for his clients instead of talking (because of laryngitis), his clients seemed to progress faster. He also noted that written communications might facilitate psychotherapy research since the personal influence of the therapist was parcelled out. Burton (1965) considered both the pros and cons of written communication. On the negative side he stated that written interpretation might be: (a) dissociative, i.e., places emphasis outside therapist-client interaction; (b) too empathetic of intellectualization rather than feelings; (c) used uncreatively; (d) a defense against direct confrontation and (e) promote introspection at times when externalization would be more appropriate. On the positive side, he felt that written communication could be: (a) a creative act and a catharsis (if written by the client); (b) provide content for further analysis; (c) more integrative of contextual factors not otherwise considered in therapy; (d) reductive of time required for treatment if used judiciously, and; (e) used in special emergencies. In recent years, Selvini-Palazzoli and her co-workers have become the most

significant advocates of using written communication. She and her team of clinicians use paradoxical letters in working with families. She reports being tremendously successful with these letters although she has not gathered any empirical data to support her claim.

There are a number of reasons for investigating the use of written communications in clinical intervention. First, if anything is worth remembering, it is worth putting in writing. Verbal messages can be forgotten, ignored, repressed, confused, distorted, or otherwise belittled and side-tracked. Hence, it may increase the efficiency and effectiveness of therapeutic techniques for feedback to be written. Second, written communications become a record that can be read repeatedly. A letter serves as a reminder of what the couple needs to think about or do that might not otherwise be thought of or done. Further, a written communication is the basis on which most adult enterprises operate. It is more binding than a verbal communication. Finally, a written communication may serve as a model of how to state issues in a careful, concise, clear and as helpful a fashion as possible.

Because written communications have these characteristics, we believe they may be useful for couples or families in the following ways: (a) to break impassive or repetitively destructive patterns not breakable otherwise; (b) to confront issues not confrontable otherwise, especially when lack of awareness, externalization, denial, and avoidance are present; (c) to specify and crystallize vague and unclear issues, and (d) to depersonalize through the written word the emotionality surrounding any issue the couple might face.

The medium chosen to test the effectiveness of written communication,

i.e., linear and paradoxical letters, was marital enrichment. L'Abate (1974) defined enrichment as "a process of intervention based on prearranged programmed lessons and exercises dealing with interpersonal relations between and among family members. The emphasis of this process is on the systematic arrangement of exercises and lessons in a gradual sequence that is assumed to be helpful and beneficial to the family or to family members." It is neither education, nor therapy, nor just an intellectual exercise. Enrichment differs from therapy in that it is structured, prearranged, can be administered to non-clinical couples or families, and can be applied by individuals with lower levels of training than that of a therapist. The model is essentially preventive and is based on the assumption that couples "learn by doing." The programs are designed to enhance overall potential and are not designed to alleviate any particular problem or symptom as in therapy.

L'Abate (1977) reviewed a number of studies on the effectiveness of structured marital enrichment and concluded that most were impressionistic and subjective. While most of the studies reviewed by him found that enrichment produces favorable results, they took place under non-controlled conditions and did not measure outcome objectively. One of the studies which meets the above criteria was one conducted by Wildman (1977). Wildman found that the use of structured marital enrichment programs developed by L'Abate (1975) were effective in improving marital relationships. In his study, he compared a control group, an enrichment group, and a therapy group. There was a significant and positive difference between the control group and the enrichment group but not between the enrichment group and the therapy group.

He concluded that both enrichment and therapy are effective forms of intervention--a finding consistent with Gurman (1973) and Beck (1975). His most dramatic finding was that therapy was no more effective than enrichment. Wildman also found that his control group made no increases, in fact decreased slightly, on pre vs. post assessment. Wagner (1977) conducted another study which extended Wildman's research. Since one of the primary goals of enrichment is to improve communication, Wagner (1977) investigated the use of written homework assignments designed to enhance communication. In addition to structural communication training improving communication skills, it has also been shown to enhance self-concept, increase self-acceptance and improve the marital relationship in general (Miller, et al., 1976; Olson, 1976).

Wagner compared 4 groups of subjects. One group was a control group, one group received written homework assignments and instructions on effective communication, but no enrichment, one group was simply enriched, and one group received enrichment, written homework assignments, and instructions on effective communication. The results showed that the groups which received written assignments evidenced the highest degree of positive change with the enrichment plus the assignment group showing the greatest improvement.

The present research focused on two types of letters. The first type of letter to be discussed is called a linear letter. These letters are written in a straightforward, easy to understand style. They serve as direct feedback to the couple much like the verbal feedback given by insight-oriented therapists. These letters reflect the couple's behavior as seen through the intervener.

The other type of letter investigated is known as paradoxical. Paradoxical letters are much more complex and difficult to compose. Paradoxical letters derive from paradoxical psychotherapy. Paradoxical approaches to therapy are fairly recent (Haley, 1973, 1976; Watzlawick, et al., 1967, 1974; Weeks & L'Abate, 1978). Paradoxical therapists employ therapeutic double-binds or pragmatic injunctions to change behavior. The emphasis is on actions rather than words. The paradoxical therapist essentially prescribes the behavior causing the problem. For example, a classical prescription is "be spontaneous." It is impossible to act on this command because it would no longer be a spontaneous behavior. According to L'Abate (1975), the paradoxical approach to psychotherapy implies a paradoxical view of behavior; i.e., behavior as multidetermined and having multiple meanings or possible interpretations (e.g. one man's trash is another's treasure). Thus, whether a behavior is seen as positive or negative is arbitrary; it depends on the frame of reference. In order to change behavior, all that is necessary is to change the frame of reference (Haley, 1976). Thus, strengths may be interpreted as weaknesses and vice versa (Weeks, 1977).

The Letter Writing Process

The letters given to the couple should be written under expert supervision since enrichers are usually paraprofessionals or beginning graduate students. The letter should not be too long--never more than a page--and it should consist of no more than two or three major points. Each point could consist of one major asset accompanied by the liability or "flip side" of the asset. If no such connection is apparent, then the asset should be listed early in the letter and then "what concerns" the enricher or "what they question,"

"muse," "wonder about," etc. is given in the latter half as issues for the couple to consider. Each member of the couple or family should receive a copy of the letter addressed as a personal letter. Numerous examples of these letters may be found in L'Abate (1977).

Paradoxical letters are constructed within a paradoxical frame of reference. Thus, they (a) are cryptic in nature; (b) are not prescriptive; (c) deal with different levels of behavior and focus on specific genotypes or underlying issues. First, the letter should possess a certain degree of cryptical obscurity, in the sense that the letter raises more questions than it answers. If the letter were clear and direct the couple could easily put it aside. However, its incompleteness in terms of meaning forces the couple to think about it more actively. Secondly, the letter should not contain prescriptive directions (shoulds or oughts) since these could be easily construed as judgmental or evaluative. Third, the letters should discriminate between the presentational (facade), phenotypical (most frequent mode of interacting) and the genotypical (underlying, inferred) levels of behavior. The connections and relationships between these differing and sometimes contradictory levels of behavior are pondered in the letter (e.g. anger vs. hurt, caring vs. protection). Moreover, issues which occur at the genotypical level need to be focused on since they are underlying and because they appear to be fairly universal. Some of these genotypic patterns include an emphasis on externals to avoid looking at self; an emphasis on thinking to avoid feeling; and an emphasis on digital thinking (i.e., on-off, black-white, true-false, good-bad, right-wrong) to avoid the complexity of increased choice and possibility. These issues should be raised in a cryptic manner. Finally, the

messages in the letter should be ad relationship rather than ad hominem. That is, the letter should be systemically oriented. It might also be noted that our letters are descriptive and not prescriptive in the sense that paradoxical therapists use. However, we recognize that to some extent all descriptions are also prescriptions (Weeks & L'Abate, 1977).

In order to demonstrate what we mean by linear and paradoxical letters, one linear and one paradoxical letter are included here.

A Linear Letter

Dear _____:

I have really enjoyed these sessions with you and am quite fond of you both. You have a good sense of humor and care a lot about how the other acts and feels. You both seem to be working on communicating effectively with each other.

I have the impression, though, that sometimes you focus on money problems to avoid confronting issues more sensitive to you both. When you blame or put each other down and fail to deal with issues directly, communication and growth of the relationship remain at a standstill. Just because one of you behaves in a hurtful way, it does not justify the other one's behaving in a similar way.

Although you do seem to have a lot of commitment in this relationship, you tend to use your friends to escape from marital responsibilities. By making your friends more important than your marriage, your involvement with them detracts from your relationship with your partner. I think you have to decide between whether you want to be married or whether you want

to remain single.

Sincerely,

A Paradoxical Letter

Dear _____:

I am very impressed with your commitment to your marriage and how much you care for each other. Each of you is very considerate of the other's feelings, and you do not wish to hurt each other.

I think that it's very commendable that you care for each other so much that you try to be like your partner. Each of you can depend on the other to avoid confronting your differences. This has allowed you to achieve a harmonious relationship which would be too risky to change right now. Why tamper with a good thing?

Sincerely,

Method

Subjects: Forty-four married couples participated in the study. All subjects were non-clinical volunteers drawn from introductory psychology courses who needed credit for participating in psychology experiments. The population is defined as non-clinical since none of the couples included in the study were asking for help in the form of enrichment or therapy. The four groups were: (1) 12 couples in the control group; (2) 12 couples in the enrichment group; (3) 12 couples in an enrichment group who received linear letters; and (4) 8 couples in an enrichment group who received paradoxical letters.

Assessment

The following techniques were utilized on a pre- post-intervention basis in this investigation:

1. Revised Marital Happiness Scale. This inventory is a modification of the Marital Happiness Scale (Azrin, Naster, & Jones, 1973) and it allows the subject to rate his or her spouse's satisfaction as well as the subject's own, providing additional scales to rate satisfaction on specific aspects of the couple's sexual adjustment.

2. Marital Progress Sheet. This form is used by the individual to rate his degree of satisfaction (on a one to ten scale) with eighteen aspects of his life situation and marital and family relationships.

3. Communication Reaction Form. This device asks the subject to rate his degree of satisfaction with ten aspects of communication behaviors in the marriage. As with all of the other instruments utilized in this investigation, the ratings were done on a one to ten scale. These ten dimensions are explained in detail for the subject in a sheet entitled "Communication Behaviors," which supplements the Communication Reaction form.

Procedure: Enrichment sessions as well as testing sessions were conducted either in the Family Study Center at Georgia State University or in the home of the couple. Arrangements were made to accommodate the needs of the enrichers as well as the enrichees. The enrichers were graduate students enrolled at Georgia State University. Different couples had different enrichers but a given enricher remained with the couple from pre-test through post-test. Likewise, the group which did not receive enrichment was evaluated by the same individual on pre- and post-testing.

The programs used in enrichment were drawn from a manual of enrichment programs written by the author and his students (L'Abate, 1975), which contains a variety of programs. The enricher, the couple, and the enrichment supervisor worked at selecting the program most suitable to each couple's needs and desires. Typically the enrichers and supervisor would select three programs that were appropriate for the couple. The enricher would then briefly describe these programs to the couple and give them the choice of selecting the program they felt best suited their needs.

Enrichment programs consist of six structured lessons. Each program has its own central theme such as negotiation, conflict resolution, assertiveness training, clarification of sexual attitudes, etc. Each lesson explores a particular aspect of the theme, building on the lesson of the previous week.

The two groups that received letters were given them at the conclusion of the fourth enrichment session. Each spouse would be handed a letter in a sealed envelope as the enricher departed. The letter was delivered as part of an agreement made at the beginning of enrichment. The letters would be discussed in a follow-up session if the couple were interested, otherwise this communication was not specifically discussed. Couples who wanted to respond to the letter earlier were allowed to do so, but the enricher would remain neutral and avoid discussing the letter until follow-up.

Results

Summary statistics derived from data

Total scores for each of the three instruments utilized in the present study were obtained for each subject by summing the rating each subject produced on the individual scales on each test. This procedure was followed for

the instruments administered both at pre- and post-testing. Missing data throughout the study were accounted for by prorating to obtain total scores. A total battery score was found for each subject by summing the total scores for the three scales used.

The data were then analyzed using analysis of covariance and analysis of variance. The total battery test scores were first analyzed for the couples in each group using analysis of covariance for pre- and post-measures. The variance contributed by the pre-test scores was statistically controlled by the use of the analysis of covariance. This analysis did not show any significant differences between the groups.

A mean couple change score was computed for each group by subtracting pre- vs. post-total battery scores for each member of the couple and summing the changes on all three scales. An analysis of variance was then performed on the change scores for the four groups. No significant difference was obtained.

Finally, the median change score for all couples was computed (23.50). Couples with change scores above the median were classified as most improved, while couples below the median were classified as least improved (see Table 1). The table shows that intervention groups made the most improvement, especially the group that received the paradoxical letter. The mean change for the groups was in the predicted direction.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

The data failed to support the hypothesis of this study. However, there is a trend in the data in the expected direction. Outcome in all the groups that received some form of intervention showed more positive pre-post mean change than a control group. When these results are viewed in the context of Wildman's (1977) study and those reviewed by L'Abate (1977), this suggests that the use of inexpensive marital enrichment is useful for couples. In addition, the resulting trend in this data suggests that written communication in the form of linear and paradoxical letters may be useful adjuncts to enrichment. Both types of letters produced greater change than enrichment alone. This trend is especially significant in light of the fact that little empirical work has been conducted on the effectiveness of paradoxical psychotherapy (Weeks & L'Abate, 1978).

The only other empirical study conducted on paradoxical treatment did not support its hypothesized superior effectiveness (Fulchiero, 1975). In this study several symptoms for each subject were identified and assigned to paradoxical treatment randomly. A variety of measures were used including patient-therapist rating of severity of symptom. There were no significant differences between symptoms treated paradoxically and those treated in a more direct manner. One of the major problems with this investigation was that only 12 subjects were studied. These findings highlight even more strongly the need for empirical research dealing with paradoxical methods or paradoxical psychotherapy, especially written paradoxical communication. At this point most of our data on the positive effects of paradoxical letters is based on clinical observation (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1975; L'Abate,

1977). For example, L'Abate et al., (1977) have stated that paradoxical letters have powerful effects on couples and families. They have observed reactions ranging from explosion of affect, to strong verbal denials, to simple compliance verbally with behavioral changes. They have concluded that couples or families who agree with the letters tend not to change, while those who disagree with the letters evidence the most change. This study attempted to assess both the degree of change and the generalization of change since the instruments used measured a variety of dimensions of the marital relationship.

This study is in many respects preliminary. The sample size was relatively small and composed of non-clinical couples. The instruments used to assess change simply required each spouse to rate various areas of their marriage. They do not ask about specific symptoms or problem areas toward which a letter may be directed. Perhaps the scope of the tests contributed to the high variability of scores obtained in this study. This study suggests that future research should use larger sample sizes, include non-clinical couples, and assess symptom resolution or severity in more specific ways.

References

- Beck, D. Research findings on the outcomes of marital counseling. Social Casework, 1975, 56, 153-181.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. Toward an experimental ecology of human development. American Psychologist, 1977, 32, 513-532.
- Burton, A. The use of written productions in psychotherapy. In L. Pearson (Ed.) The use of written communication in psychotherapy. Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1965.
- Ellis, A. The use of printed, written, and recorded words in psychotherapy. In L. Pearson (Ed.) The use of written communication in psychotherapy. Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1965.
- Fulchiero, C. Evaluation of a therapeutic paradox technique in brief psychotherapy. Dissertation Abstracts International, 1976, Vol. 26 (8-B). 4153.
- Gurman, A. The effects and effectiveness of marital therapy: A review of outcome research. Family Process, 1973, 12, 145-170.
- Haley, J. Uncommon therapy. New York: Ballantine Books, 1973.
- Haley, J. Problem-solving therapy. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.
- L'Abate, L. Family enrichment programs. Journal of Family Counseling, 1974, 2, 32-38.
- L'Abate, L. A positive approach to marital and familial intervention. In L. R. Wolberg and M.L. Aronson (Eds.) Group Therapy--1975-An Overview. New York: Stratton Intercontinental Medical Books Corp., 1975.

- L'Abate, L., and collaborators. Manual: Enrichment programs for the family life cycle. Atlanta, GA.: Social Research Laboratories, 1975.
- L'Abate, L. Enrichment: Structured interventions with couples, families, and groups. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977.
- Miller, S., Nunnally E., & Wockman, D. Minnesota couples communication program: Premarital and marital groups. In D. H. Olson (Ed.) Treating Relationships. Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Co., 1976.
- Olson, D. Treating relationships. Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Co., 1976.
- Pearson, L. (Ed.) The use of written communication in psychotherapy. Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1965.
- Selvini-Palazzoli, M., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., & Prata, G. Paradossoe controparadosso: Un nuovo modello nella terapia della famiglia a transazione schizofrenica. Milano, Peltrinelli, 1975.
- Soper, P., & L'Abate, L. Paradox as a therapeutic technique: A review. International Journal of Family Counseling, 1977, 5, 10-21.
- Wagner, V. Enrichment and written homework assignments with couples. In L. L'Abate Enrichment: Structured interventions with couples, families, and groups. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J., & Jackson, D. Pragmatics of human communication. New York: Norton, 1967.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution. New York: Norton, 1974.

Weeks, G. Toward a dialectical approach to intervention. Human Development, 1977, 20, 277-292.

Weeks, G., & L'Abate, L. A bibliography of paradoxical methods in the psychotherapy of family systems. Family Process, in press.

Weeks, G., & L'Abate, L. A dialectical typology of therapeutic paradoxes. Manuscript in preparation, 1978.

Wildman, R. Structured versus unstructured marital intervention. In L. L'Abate, Enrichment: Structured interventions with couples, families, and groups. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977.

Table 1
Overall Results for Couples

Groups	N	Mean Change	SD	Percentage Improved
Enrich. & Paradox	8	55.13	54.32	.75
Enrich & Linear	12	45.17	83.89	.50
Enrich.	12	31.17	55.14	.58
Control	12	-8.50	52.91	.23